

Japan moves to boost influence in Asia

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The Japanese government is engaged in its own diplomatic offensive to cement relationships with countries in Asia, in line with the Obama administration's efforts to undermine Chinese influence in the region. At the end of May, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited Burma (Myanmar) before hosting India Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in Tokyo.

In Burma, Abe met with President Thein Sein and unveiled a major financial aid and investment package to consolidate economic ties between the two countries. Japan's influence has been growing rapidly since Burma's military-backed government made a turn away from China and toward the US and its allies, leading to an easing of economic sanctions.

Japan's new package includes 51 billion yen (\$498.5 million) in loans to Burma, as well as 176.1 billion yen (\$1.74 billion) in debt forgiveness, as part of a larger writing off of 300 billion yen in debts agreed in April last year. The deal was based on Burma carrying out pro-market "reforms," including the passage of a foreign investment law in March that protects foreign companies doing business in the country.

Japan is also planning to build a cheap labour industrial zone in Thilawa for Japanese investors. Thilawa is a port city on the Indian Ocean, 25 kilometres south of Rangoon, encompassing nearly as much land as Macau in China.

The Burmese government allowed Abe to pay homage to the fallen Japanese troops who occupied the country during World War II in a bid by the Tokyo regime to cut the Allied supply lines to the Chinese wartime government in southwestern China.

Abe's trip is in sync with the American efforts to draw Burma out of China's orbit. Obama recently welcomed President Thein Sein in Washington, praising Burma's so-called democratic reforms that allowed the pro-Western opposition led by Aung San

Suu Kyi to take part in elections. (See: "White House welcomes Burmese president as new ally in 'pivot to Asia'")

China's state-owned *Global Times* newspaper on June 6 pointed to Japan's anti-Chinese motivations in Burma: "Japan's intention to rope Myanmar in so as to counter China's influence in Southeast Asia is obvious. Myanmar has a very important geopolitical location. Bordering on India, China, Bangladesh and Thailand, Myanmar is a hub that can connect South Asia and Southeast Asia."

China remains Burma's largest trading partner. It is building pipelines and transport in a corridor from Burma's Indian Ocean coast to southern China as a means of importing vital energy and raw materials from Africa and the Middle East, while avoiding US-controlled shipping lanes through South East Asia, including the Malacca Straits.

After returning to Tokyo, Abe met with Indian Prime Minister Singh. The two agreed to several major infrastructure and defence technology deals, and pledged to conduct more joint-naval exercises following the first one last year.

Like Obama, Abe is seeking to tie India more closely into a web of strategic arrangements directed against China. During his first term as prime minister in 2006–07, Abe advocated the formation of a "quadrilateral" partnership, consisting of the US, Japan, Australia and India, which China denounced as "an Asian NATO." While Australia effectively scuttled "the quad" as a formal arrangement, the US continued to encourage closer strategic ties between the four countries.

Last December, Abe rebranded the "quadrilateral" in an article entitled "Asia's Democratic Security Diamond." He emphasised the need for the four countries to maintain "freedom of navigation" for trading nations like Japan, South Korea, Australia and

India, without naming China, the world's largest trading nation. Abe even called for the return of the former European colonial powers—Britain and France—to the Asian region, to serve as a counter-balance against China.

During Singh's visit, Abe maintained this line of thinking, stating that it was up to "India from the west, Japan from the east" to maintain peace in the region—a provocative strategy to "flank" China, which is in the middle.

The Abe government is aggressively pursuing its involvement in South East Asia, both diplomatically and economically. After coming to office in December, Abe made his first overseas trip to South East Asia, visiting Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia. This reflects what Abe calls his "strategic diplomacy," aimed at re-asserting Japan's position as a great power.

First, as tensions rise between Japan and China over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, Abe is attempting to reduce Japan's economic reliance on China. In a survey released by Reuters in October last year, 24 percent of Japanese companies were planning to delay or scale back investment in China.

Second, Abe is hoping that by expanding Japan's long-standing economic ties with South East Asia, it can create a realignment of nations against China, including those with which it has not traditionally had close ties, such as Burma. In 2012, Japan committed \$5.1 billion to Vietnam, double the previous year's figure, including investments by Japanese banks to effectively bail out debt-stricken Vietnamese state banks.

Amid sharp tensions between China and the Philippines over the Scarborough Shoal last year, Japan agreed to supply 10 patrol boats to the Philippines. The two countries this month signed an agreement to fast-track the delivery of these ships to next April. A similar plan is in the works to provide patrol vessels to Vietnam.

India is also involved in the South China Sea, where the Indian petroleum company ONGC Videsh has signed a joint exploration deal with Vietnam in waters disputed by China. As Singh was visiting Japan, the Indian navy sent four ships to visit Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam in the South China Sea.

The US-based *Diplomat* magazine last month suggested that India was building ties with Japan,

because it meant the "more resources China is forced to devote to Eastern Asia, the less it will have available to challenge India on its overland borders or project power in the Indian Ocean, which ultimately remain India's primary concerns."

All this manoeuvring by India and Japan has been encouraged by the Obama administration's so-called "pivot to Asia"—a military and strategic re-alignment directed against China that has sharpened tensions throughout the region, dangerously inflamed flashpoints such as the South China Sea, and heightened the risk of conflict and war.



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